



THE SOCIO-POLITICAL IN DIGITALISATION

A different focus on digital education and youth work

Education for Democratic Citizenship empowers learners to participate and co-create democratic decision-making, to develop the competence to be a critical thinker in regards to the political and to contribute to democratic culture. In line with the perspective of the Council of Europe, it is clear that such a pedagogy addresses both the (analytical) ability to think and judge, as well as the (also practical) skills and attitudes needed to participate as an active citizen.



"Education for democratic citizenship means education, training, awareness-raising, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviour, to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law."

Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Council of Europe CM/Rec(2010)7)

Such a pedagogical approach, to which we are committed, achieves this by opening up socio-political learning opportunities. It seeks out the political in everyday life and at the same time addresses socio-political debates and developments through the lens of democracy and human rights. This creates a link between the everyday acts of politically effective action as citizens (my own actions and actions in my immediate environment) and the structurally effective spheres of politics (such as governance, lawmaking and law enforcement, fundamental decisions and guiding principles).

The digital is political

It is obvious that education that focuses on “the political” cannot be satisfied with a discourse on digitalisation that largely ignores the social, political, economic and cultural impacts of digital policy and digital development. In recent years, awareness has risen on the political character of developments such as platformisation, AI, structural decisions in the information ecosystem and competitive decisions in the digital market. Education must take decisive action here. It must take learners seriously as **citizens** and address them as such, rather than merely as consumers or so-called “users”.

This is what we refer to in the title “More than going with the flow”. If one always goes with the flow, at some point one will no longer know what it means to swim against the tide. Maybe one would also like to learn more about water and the ecosystem or perhaps experiment with forms of coexistence, aquariums and swimming variations that are not traditionally envisaged.

Of course, the normative frame of reference in which education operates is not cyberspace, the future or the digital world. Essentially, it is about the future of democracy in the digital and analogue worlds and in their intersections.

With its imagery, attitude and focus on the “new” and “into the new”, the digital world still harbours the adventurous mindset of (European and North-American) coloniser-explorers, which are otherwise viewed critically. Many position digitalisation against considerations that lean towards what Beck describes as **reflexive modernity**:

“ ”

“We are therefore concerned no longer exclusively with making nature useful or with releasing mankind from traditional constraints, but also and essentially with problems resulting from techno-economic development itself. Modernization is becoming reflexive; it is becoming its own theme. Questions of the development and employment of technologies (in the realms of nature, society and the personality) are being eclipsed by questions of the political and economic ‘management’ of the risks of actually or potentially utilized technologies...” (Beck, 1992, p. 19).

If digitalisation were the **rebirth of solutionism** (and the engineering spirit that can solve everything), what consequences would this have for society, interpersonal and human-machine relations? The entry into a “risk-ignorant society”, led by global super-platforms and managed by engineering problem solvers? Would that be civilisatory progress?

On the other hand, there is no reason to paint an overly dark picture. A **decentralised, open, free and accountable internet exists** and is growing, albeit largely under the radar of the public in the machine room of digitalisation. Discourse and counter-discourse are essential for progress. This makes it all the more important for our societies to inform themselves about debates concerning technology policies and to engage in them.

Digitalisation and the **state**: Depending on the civic culture we grew up in, we have different perspectives on the state, politicians, law enforcement or the legal system. In democracies, the state plays a fundamental role in decision-making and **digital governance**. So the point is not to promote trust or mistrust in the state, but to encourage critical thinking about how the state, the economy, civil society, media and citizens complement and balance each other. As digital technology becomes an important factor in all areas of life, the **general capacity of a democratic state** to act is increasingly measured by how well it manages to achieve good and efficient digital governance: from concrete decisions about a smart city or digitalisation projects of a public administration to far-reaching platform governance.

Because digital policy in Europe is largely shaped at the supranational level, an approach outlined in this way is also an example of how **education about Europe** can be conceptualised beyond a basic understanding of institutions. However, because European public opinion is very weak, governments and polarisers have long exploited this. Ground-breaking European projects e.g. are debated far too little on a national level. Sometimes, the opposite of what is announced in the national political arena is being proclaimed in Europe. Populists take every opportunity to stir up sentiment against Europe. This is particularly problematic for European digital policy in the European Union and the Council of Europe. Citizens usually only hear about the respective projects when the lobbying battle is almost over. That is why the editors of this brochure believe that European democracy depends particularly on more European-oriented education on digital issues. Educators, familiarise yourselves with digital policies. Read the newsletters of the digital civil society and listen to

European experts and researchers, particularly those with a critical political understanding of digitalisation.

In addition to the European dimension, digitalisation has a **global** dimension. The internet itself, transnational infrastructures and global value chains of digital capitalism and hardware production should be integrated into global citizenship education. Critical research provides global perspectives on developments and highlights asymmetries and inequalities. The exploitation of raw materials and rare minerals has long been a topic in some educational practices, often in the context of development aid. However, youth work and education must keep pace with current scientific and social debates. **Data colonialism** points to the irregular or badly paid workers that make the "miracle" AI work, e.g. and to the fact that platform capitalism depends on unfair and often immoral appropriation – “placing datafication within the longer history of colonial appropriations of territory and natural resources on a global scale” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 11). A short look at who delivers our food or who has to fight for basic workers' rights in the factories of the IT industry also makes it clear that this is not a matter of academic debate.

What about the **environment** and the **climate**? Although it is widely recognised that e-waste, raw material mining and their devastating ecological consequences are part and parcel of IT hardware, the opposite picture is projected on the software side. Politicians often want something similar to the EU's climate law, with variations:

“ ”

“Digital transformation, technological innovation and research and development are also important drivers for achieving the climate-neutrality objective” (EU Regulation 2021/1119).

Data and developments, as explained in the respective chapter of this handbook, point in a different direction: currently, digitalisation is jeopardising climate targets, the achievement of a circular economy, the longer use of resources and more ethical supply chains. For education, this means examining data and strategies, initiating discourse and supporting it: Which types of digitalisation, hardware and services can contribute to greater sustainability and which threaten general societal sustainability goals?

The digital economy

Datafication and platformisation have become culturally formative. However, they can only be understood by addressing the economics behind them. If “data is the oil of the digital economy,” then we are talking about economics and economic management, and therefore about IT engineering based on economic premises. Education and youth work should discuss the different suggestions how to understand the economy of the digital such as: data capitalism, platform capitalism, surveillance capitalism, European data space, “GAFAM” or “big tech”. We could also sharpen our awareness of the real and still viable alternatives to these models – the resilience of the free, interoperable, open and diverse internet ecosystem.

Of course, economics education also includes practical **financial education** and **consumer education**. Consumer protection services regarding purchasing decisions, the risk of debt, consumer rights, decision-making and dark patterns in the online context should not be reserved for the privileged few. For we see that increasingly young people are acting as producers, as providers of content (e.g. content creators) or traders of goods or speculating with financial products.

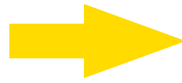
The digital is an experiential space

Some people may consider our approach to be very intellectual, but that is not the case. On the contrary, we are **enthusiastic users of digital technology** and believe that curiosity and a critical attitude go very well together. Digital education should always be a field of experimentation and an empowering space – game-based, working with media, experimental, interactive, fun. Curiosity should not only extend to what others set as a standard, but also to alternative digitalisation, that which is growing between the mainstream platforms.

We hope we have made it clearer where we see the difference between education with digital tools and socio-politically conscious education about digital technology: learning with digital tools, services and platforms; learning about these services and platforms, the interests associated with them and their impact on society; and learning that empowers people to advocate for the kind of digitalisation and digital policy that corresponds to their wishes and values.

Learning for digitalisation

(co-determining the digital transformation in society)

**Learning about digitalisation**

(social, cultural, economic impact of digitalisation in society)

**Learning through digitalisation**

(digital learning, digital tools and services)

This perspective highlights what other concepts of digital literacy often fail to address or only address peripherally: critical thinking, independent action, self-directed change and questions about the ethical and political framework of any digital policy and digital capitalism.

We would therefore like to invite the readers to view the guidelines and models for strengthening digital skills that they encounter through a political lens. Even though we have the impression that this political perspective is often overlooked, we firmly believe that young people are grateful when they are given the opportunity to think fundamentally about digitalisation, to learn how it all works in the engine rooms of tracking and analysis and to understand their rights and opportunities.

The control paradox

One paradox of digitalisation is that people accept it and use digital services and devices because they believe it gives them control and security – such as access to their bank account, to information or to their social network at any time.

At the same time, the risk of losing control increases. The more ubiquitous technology is, the less people feel able to actively intervene. They have learned to live with the fear of losing control, but it does not go away.

Rethinking technology in a non-deterministic way

When asked about your relationship with technology, what do you say? What does your partner say and what do your students say? From our experience, we know that the answers can vary widely, but they **rarely correspond to the narrative** surrounding digital technology – exciting, revolutionary, magical. If we want to get a balanced picture and not just reinforce the hype, we need to break away from such determinism.

Let's listen to **people's authentic (and often contradictory) feelings** about devices, platforms and services. People who believe they are not competent enough tend to apologise for it. But are they or are they just being too self-critical? Is the need to learn clever prompts at all proof of the technical imperfection of supposedly intuitive systems or of those sitting in front of the screen?

Building on this, we can turn to **critical digital literacy**: how do young people learn to be more than just “users” – how do they question, design, hack or use IT differently? We need citizens, not just users.



Digital reflections: reflective dialogue on media use

A dialogical card game that combines personal media experiences with structural mechanisms. Participants discuss their individual experiences in the digital world and reflect together. Developed by *mediale pfade* and published in the toolkit: Unlearning Anti-Feminism on TikTok.

→ https://competendo.net/en/Card_Game:_Digital_Reflections

Barriers to talking about digitalisation in a more political way



“Digitalisation” or “AI” are trigger words. They refer to a dominant digitalisation discourse that is deeply implanted in our culture that says: Digitalisation is “too complex” and “too technical”.

- Build analogies to other complex socio-political topics where people feel less triggered. Would they think “mobility” is too complex as well? Or would they think, that only motor engineers should discuss, how many cars should be able to enter a city centre or how many bicycle paths should be built?



“Digitalisation” addresses beliefs. The technical perspective on the world is often synonymous with “modernity”.

Depending on who is speaking, digitalisation can be: “dangerous and a threat to humanity” or, in opposite, the technology of today that gives us insight in our future or a

powerful tool to solve all problems related to other transformations like social, migration, work, climate...

- If necessary, start with a unit on **beliefs about digital technology**, both the groups’ own and those of people they know. The means of an ideology-critical methodology should not denounce these feelings, but rather make them visible as important contextual factors. Being aware of them would help to ensure that they do not overshadow the discussion on regulation. If one thinks digitalisation is totally terrible, one would not be ready to compromise on regulation. If one thinks digitalisation is wonderful without reservation, one would see all regulations as stifling its pure beauty.



Lacking knowledge about role models. The personalities presented in regards to digitalisation are all representatives of the dominant platform model – growth through scaling and data capitalism. The heroes of the alternative internet ecosystem are being pushed into the background and even

more so those fighting for democratic and intelligent regulation. Without them (and alternative and open-source software), the internet would not function.

- Share information about these real innovators and maintainers of a diverse and open internet ecosystem.



Advocates for a Free and Democratic internet

GOAL: Learn about individuals who influenced the democratic development of the internet.

This playful research introduces influential figures who shaped the development of digitalisation and the internet. The method can also be used during the introduction to the topics of digitalisation or the governance of the digital sphere.

- https://competendo.net/en/Advocates_for_a_Free_and_Democratic_Internet

We learnt to analyse power structures. Did we learn to shape them? We have a feeling for what is problematic but there is nearly no discourse on how to systematically assess systems of governance. For example: There is nearly no education on the bigger picture of how the EU and its member states aim to address hate speech in social media in the breadth of their policies. If it is talked about, then only about single elements: Right-wing influencers criticise the “trusted flaggers” foreseen in the Digital Services Act as censorship NGOs. NGOs advocate against weakening encryption of messenger apps (“chat control”). Oftentimes, only shortly before a major decision takes place the topic gets public attention. Or we hear that one platform has set up an advisory board that includes a famous person belonging to the world of NGOs. Or that another has reduced the number of employees responsible for content moderation or made it more difficult for researchers to access their data. This will also be a major problem for politicians, as many of them have also learned little about governance in a systematic way.

- In order to prevent overwhelming, **focus on things that are important to young people** and that they themselves bring up. If additional expertise is required, it can be provided by external experts, for example.
- Focus on the **perspective of young people**. Not: We are talking about social media regulation, but: Let’s talk about how we really experience moderation and help on platforms. Who supports us? What kind of support do we want?
- **Choose an area**: Don’t ask for regulating “the internet” as a whole, but think, which area you want to address in particular. “Let’s think about what electronic payment should be like” or “what needs to happen so that I can express myself on controversial topics and feel safe?”

- As an entry point, **use methods that simulate or replay elements of reality** in the training space. How amplification in social media works e.g. or the difference between information and disinformation with real examples that reflect action strategies in concrete situations... Then draw more general conclusions from these specific experiences and observations – pedagogically leading from the experience of challenges to analyses and conclusions about governance.

Distorted discourse. The reason we often turn to surveys and statistics is the frustration that public debates – as reflected in discussions, media and political proposals – give a distorted impression of people’s attitudes toward digitalisation. Survey data do not suggest that everyone is alarmed or that things cannot go fast enough for them or that they are uncritical users or that they fear their country (whichever it may be) will fall behind due to a lack of digital resilience.

Even before Elon Musk’s takeover of Twitter, tech companies were already being viewed critically. People have always considered effectively enforceable digital rights to be important. At the same time, society has also consistently demonstrated openness. Public opinion is therefore generally somewhat more balanced than the **communication of companies**, which often portray the problematic aspects of digital transformation as necessary disruption and digitalisation itself as a universal solution to social problems.

Impact of digitalisation on daily life

In your view, what impact do the most recent digital technologies currently have? Values in brackets show the **change since 2017**.

	Very positive	Somewhat positive	Negative overall	Very negative
Economy	12 % (-11 %)	50 % (- 2 %)	18 % (+8 %)	5 % (+2 %)
Quality of life	12 % (-4 %)	50 % (=)	19 % (+5 %)	5 % (+1 %)
Impact on society	10 % (- 5 %)	49 % (- 3 %)	26 % (+6 %)	7 % (+2 %)

Source: Special Eurobarometer 554, QB 1 (2024); In brackets: Change in relation to Eurobarometer 460 (2017)

We can see a longer **trend toward greater criticism**: in 2017, people generally welcomed digital transformation with more enthusiasm, but by 2024, the very positive assessments had slightly declined (the changes between 2017 and 2024 are shown in brackets). At the same time, more critical attitudes increased, especially regarding the impact of digitalisation on society and on the labour market/economy. In 2024, the topic of AI was very prominent. There was debate about the EU AI Directive and ChatGPT and other large language models became very well-known and widely used. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Europeans in general tend to view digitalisation more critically than people in other parts of the world.

Youth perspectives

One consideration that guided the editors' actions was that when a young generation grows up with digitalisation, they generate, analyse, share and store digital data from early childhood onwards. This data cloud is no longer just a fragmentary reflection of the self, but part of it. How can we give them more control and agency in relation to their digital selves? While this question is not new for other generations, it is less fundamental for "us" whose lives are not yet completely digitalised. In this sense, greater data protection and privacy contribute to "intergenerational empathy".

For a long time, there was debate over whether the so-called "digital natives," the generation that has grown up naturally with digital technology, handle this technology more wisely or more carelessly. Empirically, it cannot be confirmed that this generation possesses higher competence. Young people have a rather more positive and optimistic attitude than other generations, as the following statistic on AI in the workplace illustrates. On the one hand, this can be explained by the **everyday nature of the digital for them**; on the other hand, by the fact that, compared with other generations, they have so far had relatively **little experience in work contexts**.

Youth on AI applications in the job

Improving working conditions	77 % (Ø EU 67 %)
Allocating tasks for workers/scheduling	62 % (Ø EU 49 %)
Collecting & storing personal data	57 % (Ø EU 44 %)
Gathering additional information about job applicants	53 % (Ø EU 43 %)
Selecting job applicants	46 % (Ø EU 36 %)
Assessing workers' performance	49 % (Ø EU 36 %)
Monitoring workers	44 % (Ø EU 31 %)
Automatically firing workers	23 % (Ø EU 16 %)

Source: Special Eurobarometer 554, p. 58 (2024); n=26.415; age group: 15-24

Compared to other generations, young people's **concerns** are also somewhat more moderate, broken down here by groups of actors. They express significantly less intense worries regarding employers, advertisers, criminals/fraudsters, other governments or intelligence services:

Youth concerns: Access to data without permission by...

	Highly concerned	Moderately concerned	Not concerned
Employer	13 % (Ø 17 %)	43 % (Ø 36 %)	43 % (Ø 46 %)
Advertisers/ businesses	23 % (Ø 31 %)	44 % (Ø 42 %)	32 % (Ø 26 %)
Government	17 % (Ø 20 %)	40 % (Ø 41 %)	42 % (Ø 39 %)
Criminals/ fraudsters	46 % (Ø 55 %)	36 % (Ø 30 %)	18 % (Ø 14 %)
Law enforcement agencies	16 % (Ø 17 %)	37 % (Ø 36 %)	46 % (Ø 45 %)
National secret services	21 % (Ø 26 %)	37 % (Ø 36 %)	40 % (Ø 37 %)
Foreign governments	23 % (Ø 30 %)	37 % (Ø 33 %)	38 % (Ø 35 %)

Source: FRA Fundamental Rights Survey 2020, Europeans (n=4.195), age group: 16-29, Ø: EU 27 results for all age groups, n=20.930

As mentioned above, young people often perceive the digital environment that has surrounded them naturally since birth only little or unconsciously, just as Nicholas Negroponte anticipated in 1998:

“ ”

“Like air and drinking water, digital existence will be noticed only in its absence, not in its presence.” (N. Negroponte 1998)

- Empirical data helps us to understand our fears, concerns, hopes and political interests better. In particular, it helps us to gain a critical perspective on the representativity in the discourse, who drives it and whose voices are underrepresented.
- It should also be emphasised that one of the greatest achievements of recent decades has been the **growth of publicly accessible data**. This distinguishes democracies from authoritarian systems. What would the environmentalists of the 1980s have given for the opportunity to access public data and share data themselves!
- Sources and links to socio-political data:
https://competendo.net/en/Data_and_Reports

From an intergenerational perspective arises a **productive (generational) tension for education**: on the one hand, the youth perspective is essential. At the same time, an educational mission emerges particularly from those aspects of digitalisation that are perceived by the younger generation as natural or not even as “digital,” because they generally overlook the social and political constructedness of it.

- Digital youth work must reflect controversy and dilemma. Often the socio-political character of the digital becomes visible only within this very controversy.

Background of this handbook

This handbook is aimed at professionals as non-formal educators or youth workers, but is also intended to offer added value for teachers. It therefore has both theoretical and practical aims. That is why we have repeatedly tried to inspire readers with concrete suggestions for implementation.

We also know that conditions in the fields of youth work and non-formal education vary greatly. Some explicitly engage in democracy-related educational work, while others integrate democracy as an additional incentive for reflection, for example in open youth work. Some pursue a process-oriented approach that integrates the topics of democracy and human rights education as needed, while others consciously and specifically plan with these topics at the centre. In addition, the spatial conditions differ. Those who travel to many different locations experience different conditions than those who work with a school class or in an NGO education centre.

However, we wanted to address all of you with this book. We must also admit self-critically that we probably assume the standard conditions of non-formal education to a large extent—being able to design the space freely, divide and bring groups together, work creatively...

This handbook was developed by the DIYW ROAD project, which stands for **Digital Youth Work – rights-sensitive, open, accessible, democratic**. It is a collaboration between the Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten AdB with Sozialprofil – Verein zur Förderung individueller, institutioneller und gesellschaftlicher Entwicklung (AT), DARE – Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe vzw. (BE), Partners Bulgaria Foundation (BG), Fundación CIVES (ES) and Associação Dinamo (PT). Made possible by funding from the European Union.

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PS. We wrote our texts by hand. During the editing process we used DeepL, Claude, ChatGPT and Perplexity for different purposes, sometimes successfully, sometimes with disappointment.

Further materials from us



COMPETENDO - The Digital Citizenship Education Toolbox

→ <https://competendo.net>



Learning the Digital

Digital competence and educating digital competence. Digital transformation from the practice of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education

→ https://competendo.net/en/Learning_the_Digital

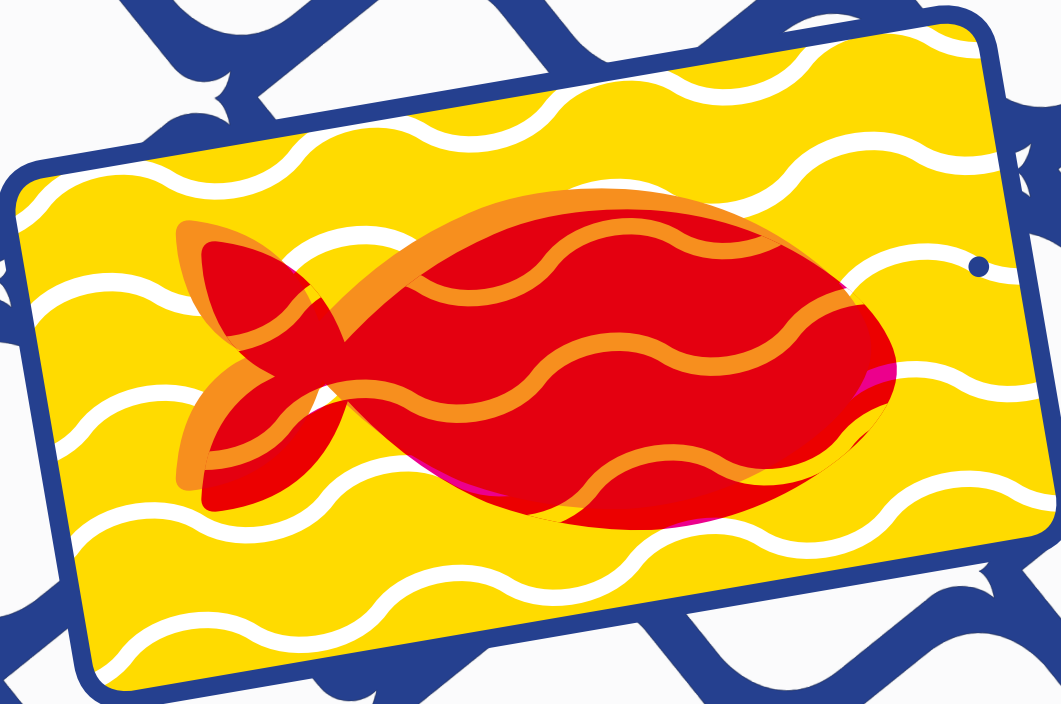
Analysis: European Youth in the Digital Transformation

How Education for Democratic Citizenship/Youth Work could contribute to pedagogies of digitality and digital empowerment.

→ <https://dare-network.eu/digital-youth-work/>

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Competendo Facilitator Handbook

MORE THAN GO WITH THE FLOW

From Platform Users to Active Citizens

This handbook is part of the series “Facilitator Handbooks“. Democratic. DARE – Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe.



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